

## Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1993 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I."  
*The Annals of Iowa* 52 (1993), 100-101.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.11047>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

midwestern states, and therefore the volume should be of considerable interest to readers who want to learn about the lives of rural and urban Germans in the midwestern states. In addition, this volume is invaluable for its meticulously researched and clearly written editorial texts. The extensive introductions to the book in general and to the three subcultures reflect the latest research on German-American migration and immigration to the United States, and the reader will gain a vast array of information and survey knowledge from them.

Altogether this book should be a very valuable addition to any reading list concerned with the firsthand experiences of immigrants as well as a rich source of information on German immigration to the United States.

*Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I*, by Carl H. Chrislock. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991. xiv, 387 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical note, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE O. CHRISTENSEN, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-ROLLA

In *Watchdog of Loyalty*, Professor Carl H. Chrislock draws a comprehensive picture of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS). He chose not to compare the Minnesota commission with other state councils of defense because the Minnesota legislature established the MCPS by a statute that predated the call from the National Council of Defense, the impetus for the organization of most other state councils. In addition, with few exceptions, other state councils had limited powers and basically carried out the policies formulated in Washington, D.C.; the Minnesota legislature, by contrast, gave its commission "almost dictatorial powers."

With those powers, the Minnesota commission defended the socioeconomic status quo "against a rising tide of radicalism" in farm areas and "a growing labor union militance in the mines, forests and working-class wards" (x) instead of working with Washington to mobilize Minnesotans for the war effort. The commission refused to implement federal policy when labor-management disputes erupted in 1918, and it disagreed with federal policy toward the Nonpartisan League. Washington sought to co-opt the League, while the Minnesota commission tried to exclude it by encouraging fearful "local officials to ban league activity" in their areas (x). Although the commission led an "intolerant loyalty crusade" against

German-Americans, its "top objective" remained "defeating trade unionism and the Nonpartisan League" (xi).

In fifteen chapters and more than three hundred pages, Chrislock spells out in great detail the functioning of the MCPS. The author successfully places its activities in historical context, draws informative profiles of the actors in the drama, and provides analysis of commission activities. As an author of previous works on Minnesota in the same time period, including *Ethnicity Challenged: The Upper Midwest Norwegian American Experience in World War I* (1981) and *The Progressive Era in Minnesota: 1899-1918* (1971), Chrislock writes with authority about his subject. For *Watchdog of Loyalty*, he consulted numerous newspapers, the extensive files of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety Papers, and the papers of such key figures as Senator Knute Nelson and Governor J. A. A. Burnquist. Thus, Chrislock's interpretation is based on extensive research and a sophisticated understanding of his sources. Without doubt, the author accomplished what he set out to do in this volume.

Nevertheless, the book would have been improved if Chrislock had compared the Minnesota Commission with other states' activities, in even a limited way. His bibliography lists recent articles about state councils of defense in Connecticut, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. Gilbert Fite wrote two other articles that would help in comparative analysis: "The Nonpartisan League in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 24 (1946), and "Peter Norbeck and the Nonpartisan League in South Dakota," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33 (1946). Apparently, nothing of recent vintage exists for Iowa, Wisconsin, and other midwestern states, but two earlier studies about Iowa during the war might form the basis for comparing councils in Iowa with the Minnesota experience and for eventually writing the history of state council activities in the Midwest: Nathaniel R. Whitney's *The Sale of War Bonds in Iowa* (1923), and Ivan L. Pollock's *The Food Administration in Iowa* (1923).

Finally, although the book is clearly written, it could have been more interestingly presented and shortened. Careful editing would have resulted in a reworking of a few awkward sentences and the elimination and shortening of some quotations. The result would have been a shorter, more easily read volume. But these are minor points. Chrislock has done the research and written a volume that informs, enlightens, and instructs.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.